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ABSTRACT

The National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC) is the largest counselor certification agency in the U.S. and is widely recognized as a national credential based upon training, experience, and performance on a written examination. NBCC has developed two examinations: the National Counselor Examination (NCE) and the National Career Counselor Examination (NCCE). Currently, both examinations are knowledge-based and NBCC relies on the candidate's experience and supervision as competency checks. A revised NCE will be competency-based. A new clinical counseling examination is also under development. As state licensure for counselors becomes commonplace, national credentialing becomes even more important because: (1) National certification is broader than state licensure; (2) State licensure is subject to the politics of the state; (3) National certification provides referral sources across state lines; and (4) Most state licenses do not provide for a license in a specialty. (ABL)

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The Counselor and NBCC

Thomas W. Clawson and Victoria Wildermuth

Introduction

Counseling is a relatively young field. Significant advances that counseling has made in becoming a profession can be clearly attributed to credentialing activity (Bradley, 1991). The establishment of standards for practice within the profession has been of major importance. Jointly, national counselor certification and state credentialing (licensure, certification, registry) are major reasons why counseling is achieving parity with related professions in the behavioral sciences (Wittmer, 1992). The National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC) is the largest counselor certification agency in the United States, representing over 17,000 National Certified Counselors (NCCs) and 1,500 counselors certified in the specialty areas of career counseling, gerontological counseling, and school counseling. Prior to the inception of the broad-based NBCC National Certified Counselor credential in 1982, only five states legally regulated the practice of professional counseling. Since that time, the number of states regulating the practice of counseling has grown steadily from five to 38. In addition to the 17,000 counselors certified by NBCC, roughly 50,000 counselors are state credentialed. These large populations of professionally accountable, credentialed counselors possess enhanced visibility and credibility, ensuring their right to equal participation in the mental health care and human development fields (Wittmer, 1992).

Historical Perspective

Mental health professionals have sought legal recognition in the form of certification and licensure since the 1940s when psychologists and social workers began what would be a 50-year process to gain recognition in all states. The counseling profession made dramatic strides in the mid-1970s when the American Counseling Association (ACA, then the American Personnel and Guidance Association, APGA) documented the need for counselor credentialing via needs assessments conducted within the profession. Direct results included both the endorsement of formalized standards of training prepared by the Association for Counselor Educators and Supervisors (ACES), and the creation, in 1982, of the National Board for Certified Counselors. NBCC was designed to certify a broad-based professional counseling population based on documentation of requisite professional experience, supervision, academic training and successful performance on a knowledge-based written examination, NBCC's National Counselor Examination (NCE). The ACES standards define appropriate content areas for NBCC's National Counselor Examination and are used by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) as the basis for graduate program accreditation (Loesch & Vacc, 1991). The NCE is now commonly administered to students graduating from CACREP programs, thus establishing NBCC certification as the next professional step following program completion. The NCE is also used as a component of 28 state-credentialing processes.

In the 1980s, NBCC, CACREP, and the independent specialty counselor certification boards of the Commission on Rehabilitation Counselor Certification (CRCC) and the National Academy of Certified Clinical Mental Health Counselors (NACCMHC) formed the core of counselor credentialing on the national level. Simultaneously, state laws for the regulation of private practice counselors flourished. As of this writing, 38 states have laws regulating the private practice of counselors and all states regulate public school counselors. Through provision of the NCE to state credentialing boards, NBCC supports what became a major focus of the counselor credentialing movement in the 1980s: licensure of counselors, state by state. NBCC has promoted unification of testing standards via provision of the NCE to state boards.

The NBCC Examinations

NBCC has developed two examinations: the National Counselor Examination (NCE) and the National Career Counselor Examination (NCCE). The NCE will undergo its first comprehensive revision in 1994, based upon a major work behavior analysis completed by NBCC in 1992. Presently, there are over 20 separate forms of the NCE and it has recently been translated into Spanish.

The NCCE is the written examination component of the NBCC National Certified Career Counselor (NCCC) credentialing process. Like the NCE, it undergoes ongoing development. The NCCE will undergo content revision beginning in 1992 to reflect the National Career Development Association's (NCDA) revised career counselor competencies. Beginning in 1992, the NCCE will be used for the first time for state-based specialty credentialing by the California Career Counselor Registry.

In addition to revising the National Counselor Examination, NBCC is constructing a new "clinical counseling examination" to be normed before 1994. This will be a companion

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examination to the revised NCE. NBCC's present examinations are knowledge based, rather than competency based. The upcoming revision of the NCE will result in a competency-based assessment tool. NBCC currently relies upon assessment of certification candidates' experience and supervision as competency checks for certification. (Loesch & Vacc, 1991; Sampson & Loesch, 1991.)

NBCC's Role and Purpose

As state licensure becomes commonplace, national credentialing becomes even more important to ensure a unified definition of counseling and its practice. Why would one hold both licensure and NBCC certification?

- **National certification is broader than state licensure.** Certification compares the certificant with a national population; state licensure is restricted to comparison with the population of a state.
- **State licensure is subject to the politics of the state.** Sunset commissions in states may terminate the enabling legislation for credentialing.
- **National certification provides referral sources across state lines.** The NBCC database identifies counselors in all states who accept referrals. A state license provides opportunities for state networking; the national certification affords opportunities for national networking.
- **Most state licenses do not provide for a license in a specialty.** National certification offers certificants the opportunity to add an advanced specialty designation.

The NBCC has evolved over its 10-year history from the original concept of providing a broad-based registry of trained counselors to its current configuration as a widely recognized national credential based upon training, experience and performance on a written examination. Further, NBCC is the central point within the profession for establishing national certificates for specialty training. Presently, the National Certified Career Counselor (NCCC), the National Certified Gerontological Counselor (NCGC), and the National Certified School Counselor (NCSC) are available to professional counselors who hold the National Certified Counselor (NCC) general practice credential.

NBCC participates actively in the National Organization for Competency Assurance (NOCA), the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA), and the Council on Licensure, Enforcement and Regulation (CLEAR). These organizations disseminate current information on legislation and government regulations and provide interprofessional oversight of credentialing programs.

Conclusion

In order for counseling to be seen as a profession by the public, the legal system, and federal and state governments, a complex set of requirements must be met. Establishment and perpetuation of professional societies, research, publication, training standards, and certification are all important factors in defining any profession. Certification emerges as a key ingredient, not only to protect and inform the public, but also to promote professional excellence. Certification denotes the meeting of standards of training and experience and the continuance of standards of ethics and education.

The future of NBCC certification is certain. Yearly, the number of certified and licensed counselors rises by 10% or more. The public recognizes the terms "counselor" and "counseling" as being part of the helping professions. Counseling is gaining additional distinction as time passes. The allied mental health professions are moving more toward providing equal opportunities for individuals practicing in a variety of related helping professions. The hierarchical attitudes of the past are fading, much to the advantage of the counseling profession's constituencies.

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